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## GEORGE COMBE AND AMERICAN SLAVERY

What has come to be called the "colour problem" has been perhaps the greatest cause of torment to the individual and to society in America since the United States became a nation, and even before that. In the early days the situation was simpler, as society was simpler, and the problem lay submerged, or partly submerged, under the flood which bore the new nation forward into what men in both America and Europe thought was a new liberty. In a sense it was simpler too in that it was not merely a "colour problem" but a "slavery problem," and thus easier to define. One great, unambiguous dividing line separated black from white, slave from owner, bondman from free. Simpler it may have been—and its simplicity should not be too much stressed—but in its flagrant denial of human worth and dignity slavery is matched by few other crimes in the sorry history of man's inhumanity to man.

By the time that George Combe set foot in America the slavery problem had long since left its earlier simpler phase behind and was in the process of becoming insoluble as far as normal political processes were concerned. This is not the place to trace in any detail the complex history of slavery in America or of the rise of the anti-slavery movement. But it is essential to an understanding of Combe's very limited contact with American slavery that its more important events and features should be mentioned.

One major reason for the daunting complexity of the slavery problem in the United States was its confusion, almost to the point of identification, with other problems; with the territorial expansion of America, with the "cotton economy" of the South, and with the variously defined demarcation line between state and federal governmental jurisdiction. Certainly during the time of Combe's visit most Americans had not yet differentiated the slavery question from other questions although resentment and even revulsion against slavery were becoming acuter and more widespread, just as the slaveholders and their supporters were becoming more hardened in their attitude and more positive in their claims that slavery was not merely expedient, it was right. Dwight

L. Dumond writes of the anti-slavery movement in the United States falling roughly into three major periods. The first was the era of the American Colonization Society, founded in 1816-1817 to transport free Negroes from the United States to Africa and the Carribean. This was followed by the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, far more militant than the Colonization Society;<sup>1</sup> during 1837-1838 alone this organization published seven thousand, eight hundred and seventy seven bound volumes, forty seven thousand tracts and pamphlets, four thousand one hundred circulars, and ten thousand four hundred and ninety prints.<sup>2</sup> Combe met the Anti-Slavery Society's outstanding personality, William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of perhaps the most outspoken of all anti-slavery papers, *The Liberator*. Beyond their meeting, however, Combe has nothing to say of the man. By 1839, according to Dumond, the best work of the Anti-Slavery Society was done and the anti-slavery cause was taken up by the Liberty Party. Whatever the truth of this it can be said with certainty that during the period 1839-1840, that is, during the time of Combe's visit to the United States, abolitionism, as distinct from the milder forms of anti-slavery feeling, could claim only a very limited support in America.

George Combe met his first Negro during his first visit to Philadelphia, in January, 1839. At Marshall House Hotel, Combe's Philadelphia lodging, a Negro servant employed by the hotel was responsible for the care of the rooms engaged by Combe and his wife. George took a considerable interest in this man and in his nineteen-year-old son, Rob Roy. This interest was, to some extent, in that which is unfamiliar but is none the less worth noting, despite its being partly couched in phrenological terms. Long before this Combe's habit of using phrenological terminology had become almost ingrained although it is certain that other non-phrenological considerations played a more important role in shaping his opinions. The older man he noted had a "European head" despite his being "a complete Negro," and this gave rise to his speaking,

<sup>1</sup>Dwight L. Dumond, *Antislavery Origins of the Civil War in the United States*, (London, Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 85.

thinking, and acting in a completely "European manner."<sup>3</sup> Cautiousness, Conscientiousness, Firmness, and Benevolence<sup>4</sup> were all large and manifested themselves in qualities of faithfulness, respectfulness, reflectiveness, and attentiveness. It is obvious that Combe felt real sympathy for his Negro servant but it is significant that his sympathy was limited to approval of those of the man's characteristics which Combe regarded as "European," and also to those which he no doubt regarded as proper in a servant. He makes no mention of any others but, consciously or not, he implies that any characteristic which did not conform to a "European" category could be regarded as unfortunate racial inferiority.<sup>5</sup> This by no means proves that Combe was not liberal to a commendable degree in his attitude to the "colour" question. Considering his background<sup>6</sup> and that, aged fifty, this was his first personal contact with a Negro, he displayed a not illiberal prejudice. In conferring the title "European" on his servant Combe was conferring on him a status which he intended as a sincere compliment. It would have been asking almost too much of him to have expected him to be "colour blind." In the maelstrom of the "colour problem" it is more often than not the white "liberal," despite his best intention, whose position is most often morally ambiguous; it is he who most often sinks into hypocrisy, moral righteousness and a patronising attitude, although Combe seldom fell into any of these.

He had always deemed himself an anti-slavery man. In the *Constitution of Man*,<sup>6</sup> regarded by mid-nineteenth century opinion as the definitive work on phrenology, he wrote highly, if vaguely, of the United States. The only blemish (and it was the standing embarrassment of liberal opinion in Great Britain sympathetic to the United States) was Negro slavery. Two years before leaving for America—before, in fact, he had even decided to go—Combe wrote to Dr. W. B. Sprague

<sup>3</sup>Combe Papers, National Library of Scotland, MS. Journal, I, p. 257.

<sup>4</sup>All these refer to phrenological categories, or more properly, faculties.

<sup>5</sup>This may be taken to have been Whig (with Radical inclinations), professional (Combe started life as a lawyer), prosperous, and Presbyterian (with a strong sceptical streak).

<sup>6</sup>*The Constitution of Man Considered in Relation to External Objects* (Edinburgh, John Anderson, Jun., 1828).

of Albany, N. Y., that slavery was the "darkest stain on the fair face of American freedom," and that he hoped for its speedy abolition. He did not, however, see that this could be accomplished by a single, swift, legislative reform—"the disease is too deeply ingrained"—but only by the slower, surer process of education; of both sides, the slaves and their masters, and this should be begun immediately.<sup>7</sup> At the time of Combe's writing this letter, anti-slavery feeling in Great Britain had enjoyed a long and widespread support, and Combe was almost certainly familiar with at least some of its propaganda. He had even been caught up in the movement in a modest way. A few months before his letter to Sprague he had been called upon to clarify his position on slavery in the face of criticism from the well-known abolitionist orator, George Thompson, who in the course of his Edinburgh speeches, so Combe alleged, had attacked phrenologists for entertaining "a prejudice against colour." Combe's written reply condemned Thompson's allegation as utterly false and urged him to read the *Constitution of Man* for a true estimate of the phrenological position. It was certainly not unfashionable to be anti-slavery in Britain at that time and Combe can have needed no great depth of courage to take the stand he did. Relatively isolated from the actual practice of slavery he felt a vague moral revulsion from something which he recognised as wrong but whose remoteness made it difficult for him to appreciate. Vicarious suffering, if there in fact be such a thing, is perhaps only a divine attribute and an abstract love of all mankind is no doubt confined to saints. Certainly Combe's commitment to the anti-slavery cause did not extend to his wishing to enter the arena on its behalf for in a letter to William Ellery Channing, written on March 28, 1838, he asked whether it would be wise for the author of a work which denounced American slavery to venture into the turmoil and agitation of a country where opinion on the subject was so divided and so strongly held. In any case, he continued, he intended to avoid if possible all controversy in America, and certainly not to visit the South.<sup>8</sup> All this was

<sup>7</sup>Combe Papers, MS. Letterbook, V, Combe to Sprague, May 11, 1836.

<sup>8</sup>Combe Papers, MS. Copybook, 2A, Combe to W. E. Channing, March 28, 1838.

written before Combe had any firsthand experience of Negro slavery or even any personal contact with Negroes. His American visit brought him both of these and helped to sharpen the focus of his ideas on the subject. He never allowed his feelings in this matter to stand in the way of personal friendship. With Charles Caldwell of Kentucky, for example, he maintained a regular and cordial correspondence despite Caldwell's notorious ethnological views.<sup>9</sup> Caldwell was of course an ardent phrenologist and did a great deal to advance Combe's reputation in the United States. This no doubt had a great deal to do with Combe's (before his visit to the United States) looking on Caldwell as one of the Americans whom he most admired.

It was in Philadelphia that the Negro problem first forced itself on Combe's attention, for it was there that he first came into close contact with coloured people. His Negro hotel servant has been mentioned above and shortly after taking up residence at the Marshall House Hotel his awakened curiosity in the American Negro took him to hear the coloured preacher, "the Revd. Mr. Douglas,"<sup>10</sup> conduct a service in a Negro church. The sermon was excellent and the decorum of the whole proceedings impeccable, which was more than Combe found in many of the white churches he visited. Beyond this his journal says nothing but the occasion must have done something to reinforce his sympathetic prejudice in the Negro's favour.

White Philadelphia opinion, it seemed to Combe, amongst what he termed "*computing* persons,"<sup>11</sup> opposed Negro colonization schemes as futile. He appears to have made no attempt to find out why this should have been the case but a little later in his journal records that in conversation with a Mr. Matthias he remarked that he "regretted that Abolition Societies condemned the Colonization societies so severely, & expressed an opinion that both were useful."<sup>12</sup> It was explained to Combe at a later date in his American visit that the

<sup>9</sup>Caldwell was a noted exponent of theories of Negro racial inferiority.

<sup>10</sup>This was almost certainly William Douglass, pastor of the African Protestant Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, Philadelphia.

<sup>11</sup>Combe Papers, MS. Journal, I, p. 272.

<sup>12</sup>MS. Journal, II, p. 79.

opposition of the Abolitionists to the Colonization societies arose from the Colonization projects being favoured by the slaveholders themselves who feared that the presence of free Negroes in America would be an incitement to the slaves.<sup>13</sup> It was from the upper reaches of society in the North that the Colonization societies received most of their support and since it was from this group that Combe received a significant part of his impressions of American life it is perhaps logical that he failed to see the true nature of the Colonization Society. A modern scholar has described its motivating force as a "rationalization for the lazy intellect, a sedative for the guilty conscience, a refuge for the politician and professional man."<sup>14</sup> By the time of Combe's arrival in the United States the idea of colonization had lost much of its first appeal and was in decline, and the slavery question was passing into politics. Although it is true that in the North the Colonizationists derived much of their support from the wealthier and more conservative section of the community it is also true that it was from this very same section that the Abolitionists first sprang. Indeed for some time abolition found very little support from the American working class or from the Democratic Party.

Also while in Philadelphia Combe was struck by the "violent antipathy"<sup>15</sup> to coloured people amongst a wide section of the whole population, even among the well-educated. The reasons for this he put down to prejudiced education, inconvenience from the coloured population, and substantial white interests in the South. Only a "warmly philanthropic"<sup>16</sup> minority had any real regard for the Negro's plight. To some extent Combe was indulging in a "holier-than-thou" attitude towards many Americans for, despite the warmth of his opinions, he himself had not shown any willingness to become an active proponent of the anti-slavery movement. In conversation with some anti-abolitionists in Philadelphia he heard Henry Clay's Senate speech of February 7, 1839, praised for its moderation and wisdom; Clay on slavery, as

<sup>13</sup>MS. Journal, III, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup>Dumond, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup>MS. Journal, I, p. 273.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*



on almost everything else, advocated compromise in the interests of national unity, and, without publicly avowing it, of his own political fortune. Without committing himself on Clay's speech Combe asked "whether anyone pretended to justify slavery, or to say that a time would come when it must cease."<sup>17</sup> He was answered that "few would maintain it absolutely right"<sup>18</sup> but that to avow this publicly would only aggravate the already overheated abolitionist agitation. At the outset of his American visit had been unquestionably anti-slavery but far from an out and out abolitionist. Now, with some firsthand experience of slavery, he was seeking to clarify his position, as indeed were many in the United States to clarify theirs.

Journeying from Philadelphia to the federal capital, Washington, the Combes spent a day in Baltimore where they were given intimate opportunity to study slavery at firsthand. George signalled their arrival in Baltimore by entering in his journal for February 17, 1839: "We are now in Maryland, the Land of Slaves."<sup>19</sup> The serving-staff in their lodging-place, Barnum's City Hotel, was entirely Negro and slave, Combe's first actual encounter with slavery. To his journal he confided his moral indignation and revulsion, not by any means completely insincere or canting. When he reflected, he wrote, that these human beings could be, and indeed were, regarded as "property," to be bought and sold in the market-place, to be exhausted in labour at the whim of their "owners," he declared himself outraged. "Custom seems to make such scenes 'not disagreeable'; but may God protect my moral faculties from ever becoming so blunted or perverted as to view them without disgust."<sup>20</sup> All of this outburst was confined to his journal, not one word of condemnation passed his lips to the hotel management, and apparently none of sympathy to the serving-staff. He commended them as "civil & attentive, & passably intelligent," and noticed that their brains were "smaller, and their natural mental capabilities more slender

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>18</sup>MS. Journal, I, p. 278.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 283.



than those of the free Negroes in Pennsylvania.’’<sup>21</sup>

The next day brought the Combes to Washington where, almost immediately after his arrival, George read in the *Daily National Intelligencer* advertisements for Negro slaves. Not even Henry Clay’s eloquence, thought Combe, could reconcile the implication of those advertisements with the higher moral feelings of mankind. The Capital at that moment, he wrote, symbolized not Freedom but a mockery of Freedom; one-sided, selfish, “white” freedom.<sup>22</sup> Prepared as he had imagined himself to be for the appearance of slavery he found it more revolting than he had ever anticipated. Even after every excuse in its extenuation had been advanced, its institution by the British, the mountainous difficulties in the way of its abolition, and the fact that the slaveholders were the victims rather than the authors of the system, it still remained a monumental wrong, and if the slaveholders did not themselves make an effort to end the institution then an affronted Providence certainly would, but it would be “in tempest & storm, in blood & devastation, in cries and misery.”<sup>23</sup> Despite the rather Old Testament rhetoric there is no doubt that Combe did feel a genuine revulsion at what he saw, but again it did not lead him into making his feelings public. He might, for example, have sounded Henry Clay for a clearer picture of Clay’s position on slavery when he met Clay but he did not.

Combe’s interest in slavery was now thoroughly aroused and on May 7, 1839, on his return to New York from Washington, he attended a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in the New York Tabernacle, attended by about fifteen hundred, of whom two-thirds were women, “mostly lower middle class.”<sup>24</sup> At the end of that same year Combe met the Anti-Slavery Society’s most vigorous abolitionist, the most vigorous in all America, William Lloyd Garrison, but on the basis of a phrenological analysis Combe found him “sincere in abolition, but he is not a great mind.”<sup>25</sup>

Up until this time Combe’s experience of slavery, although

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>24</sup>MS. Journal, II, p. 63.

<sup>25</sup>MS. Journal, III, pp. 121-122.

it made an immediate and powerful impression on him, had been one of fleeting glimpses. But on March 25, 1840, he set out with his wife on a tour of the southwest which carried him into two of the slave states, Virginia and Kentucky. It is true that this was a very brief visit, only two weeks of it were actually spent in these two states, but since it was Combe's most prolonged contact with slavery, it is not without interest.

Before actually coming to Virginia the Combes passed through Maryland and here they saw rural slavery for the first time. It was a depressing sight and reminded Combe of conditions in Ireland, although Ireland technically speaking had no slaves. It was not only, however, the slavery which rendered Maryland so depressing, but the general condition of all the people, white as well as coloured. At Little Crossings, Maryland, the Combes stopped at an inn where they were served "by a black boy of nine years of age."<sup>26</sup> Virginia was even more depressing than Maryland, the inns were filthy, the servants ill-clothed and "slop-shod." Combe was of course now passing through the Alleghenies, the home of the "mountain people," cut off even today from the mainstream of social intercourse where, apart from anything else, the sheer geography of the country does a great deal to submerge any human attempt at sophisticated living. It was along the National Road that the Combes travelled, running from Baltimore to Vandalia, and since this passed through the southwestern corner of Pennsylvania they again found themselves in Pennsylvania and amongst free Negroes. As before they noted the much better conditions and atmosphere where Negroes were free. Ten days after starting on their tour the two travellers arrived in Wheeling, Virginia (now West Virginia), "a smoking, dirty place of 14,000 inhabitants,"<sup>27</sup> where they lodged at "the best hotel, the Virginia House, & found it large & dirty in the extreme." It may, however, have been some consolation to them to hear that "the other, the United States," was worse. The servants in Virginia were also slaves, dressed in "the most slovenly & often absurd fashion,"<sup>28</sup> something which was not true of free Negroes

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 241.

whom Combe found "fond of dress," and who dressed well. Leaving West Virginia the Combes passed through Southern Ohio, stopping briefly at Cincinnati, "blackened by coal smoke" and with a general appearance of being unfinished but, considering that it stood in what thirty-five years before had been wilderness, a remarkable sight.<sup>29</sup> On April 15 the Combes reached Louisville, Kentucky, the westernmost point of their entire American visit, and the home of one of Combe's oldest and most faithful protagonists in the battle to advance phrenology, Charles Caldwell. Combe was not in the least surprised to find that his champion of almost twenty years' standing was a man of "very powerful intellect" but, alas, "a terrible egotist, & desperately disputatious."<sup>30</sup> It may have been this which kept Combe from raising the question of slavery with Caldwell whose views on racial theory were as reactionary as they were forcefully expressed. Combe added little to his knowledge of slavery conditions during his two days in Louisville, beyond noting that there were three thousand slaves in the town whose work was far less well and far less enthusiastically done than that of free men.

The Combes made the return journey east by way of Kentucky's capital, Frankfort. They arrived there to find the town in the throes of a religious revival which had resulted, amongst other things, in the conversion of the Governor who now prayed every sunrise, in public. This impressed Combe, as his journal notes: "Amidst all these preachings & prayings & conversions not a voice is raised against Slavery."<sup>31</sup> Unhappily Combe's was also silent.

After leaving Frankfort the two made their way north-east to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as quickly as the circumstances of their travel would allow, seeing as they went some fine "genteel looking establishments,"<sup>32</sup> the homes of Kentucky landowners; also the homes of their Negro slaves. It was only the fact of the latter's having chimneys which

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 283.

enabled Combe to distinguish them from “pig styes & cattle sheds.”<sup>33</sup>

This was the last Combe ever saw of Negro slavery but not the last of his thoughts on the subject. These, however, he reserved until his return to Great Britain when he felt more free to share his opinions on the subject than he had while in America, but only in the relative privacy of his letters to his American friends. American slavery was undoubtedly the feature of American life which Combe found most distasteful and least worthy of the American mission, but it never dimmed his belief in the ultimate success of this mission. His contact was much too brief for his account of it to be anything than of minor interest. He encountered it first at an age when his ideas had to some extent been set and his experience of it did little to broaden his knowledge or to stimulate him into any searching inquiry. He came upon it armed with distinctly liberal, even radical, prejudices but he never really progressed beyond his first revulsion, nor did he really commit himself fully to an abolitionist stand.

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#### *Note*

George Combe (1788-1858) was a Scots lawyer whose main claim to remembrance has until the present rested upon his writings as a phrenologist. From 1838 until 1840 Combe and his wife were in the United States on a lecture tour. His observations on slavery, limited as they are, are of some interest in illustrating the attitude of a fairly representative British liberal of the time.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*